



03| Mijksenaar's revision of Wissing's displays kept to the same basic principles. The simple layouts of Wissing's signs were adapted primarily because the amount of information on the signs had increased enormously, whereas the amount of space available in the building had remained practically the same. 04| The 'pijlacolade' system extends the arrow and makes it unnecessary to indicate each destination with a separate arrow. 05| Yellow letters. Akzidenz Grotesk. Black: Frutiger. Mijksenaar says that research shows that most people are unaware of differences in typefaces. "Schiphol has opted for a crisp, timeless, sans-serif typeface called Frutiger, which was purpose-designed for Charles de Gaulle International Airport in Paris by French/Swiss typeface designer Adrian Frutiger."

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A conversation about wayfinding with Paul Mijksenaar, a specialist in the creation of visually oriented information systems.

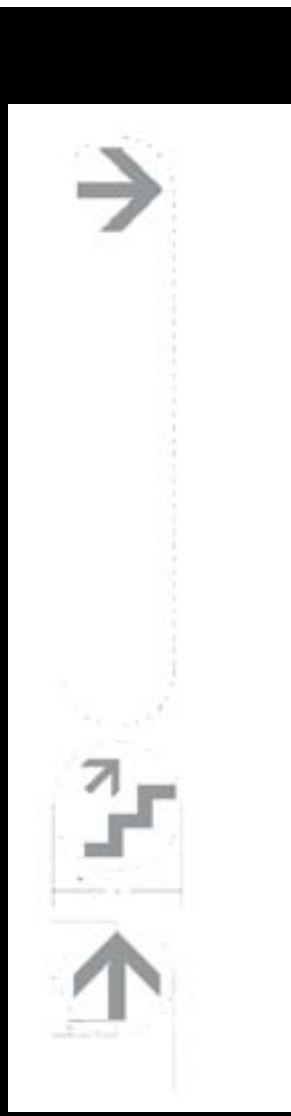
01

01| Back in the day - the original Schiphol Airport, built in 1917. The introduction of the passenger jet, and affordable flights for the masses, led to the airport being rebuilt in 1967, with interior work by architect Kho Liang Ie, who brought graphic designer Benno Wissing of Amsterdam studio Total Design on board to create the signage. Wayfinding expert Paul Mijksenaar has been revising Wissing's Schiphol signage since 1990. 02| In *Wayfinding at Schiphol*, Mijksenaar states that Wissing's "point of departure was signage that would stand out sharply - thanks to layout, dimensions and colour - in an airport with a decidedly inconspicuous interior design." A colour-coded scheme was devised with yellow signs for everything related to arrivals and departures, and green signs indicating all other airport facilities.



02

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04



**Q:** At a simplistic level, what determines the success of a wayfinding project? Are there rules of thumb, irrespective of what type of space it is?  
**PM:** We try to apply to fulfil to the principle of the '7 Cs'. Wayfinding/signage should be Comprehensive, Clear, Consistent - from start to end... and back, Conspicuous, Contextually harmonious, Catching the eye, and Centred on end users.

**Q:** Is there an international standard for airport signage? Should there be?  
**PM:** A group of American airport organisations provides guidelines for airport signing and graphics but it seems that most airports use their own standards. I think that at least some basic elements should be internationally standardised, like the use of international symbols, colour coding, terminology.

But more than airports, health care facilities need standardisation. Even now on a national scale, every hospital uses its own system, even sometimes even their own symbols! In the US there is a movement called 'Hablamos Juntos' that hopes to raise a standard set of health care symbols to overcome the problem of patients from so many nationalities. In New York alone, there are more as 90 nationalities!

Nevertheless 'Hablamos Juntos' is based on the wrong assumption that medical symbols could be self explanatory, and violates the basic principle that one only should use symbols for concrete services that are well known, unless there is guarantee that all users have 'learned' this specific pictorial language. A good example of this principle is road signs, which are seldomly self-explanatory but have to be learned by heart when you apply for a drivers license. But even among drivers, the rate of spontaneous recognition of road signs is surprisingly weak.

**Q:** As a signage specialist, whose focus is on highly visible elements, do you find yourself at cross

purposes with architects who don't want a building's appearance compromised?

**PM:** To be honest, most of our 'fights' are with some architects who hate that the idea that the attention of the audience is distracted from their beautiful building to our signs! To smoothen the co-operation between architects and wayfinding designers, we created a list of specifications for both, architecture as well as wayfinding. In short: architects design the 'equipment', we provide the 'user instruction manual'.

**Q:** What forms of public signage should feature at libraries, civic centres and museums. These buildings are often 'iconic' structures with subtle signage. Should signage ever be subtle, even in the rarefied air of such institutions?

**PM:** There is a big psychological gap between the user experience at an airport or hospital and museums and libraries. In the second group you can demand users make a bigger effort to explore the facility - but only to a certain extent. In the end, and in every building, people have to find the restrooms and finally the exit when they want to go home. When the directions to key services are too subtle people get angry.

**Q:** I'm interested in ideas that evolved from the Schiphol Airport project you worked on in the early '90s. I've read that in the original architectural concept from the 60s, it was the architect's intention that no colours would be used except for signposting...

**PM:** The revolutionary colour-coding concept for Schiphol Airport was introduced in 1967 by the interior architect Ko Liang Ie and the graphic designer Benno Wissing - who both passed away. We took over in 1990 and decided to maintain all valuable design concepts. Colour-coding was of course one of them, but we had to change the typography and even to modify the colour-coding for the sake of the rules of human factors.



01 - 02) Symbols used at Schiphol are based on an internationally standardised set of symbols - ISO 7001 Public Information Symbols - created in 1980, augmented by classic public transportation symbols from a set developed in 1974 by the United States Department of Transportation in collaboration with the American Institute of Graphic Arts. Because both sets are limited to the most important transport functions, in the course of time Mijksenaar has added symbols that display the same style and spirit.  
 03) A separate collection of illustrations deliberately deviates from these international Public Information Symbols. Called 'mascots', they were designed to help passengers using parking garages P1, P2 and P3 remember where they parked their cars.

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01

01| Another airport - Christian Schwartz based this typeface, called Eero, on an unnamed typeface drawn by Eero Saarinen for Dulles International Airport. Schwartz says: "Architects rarely, if ever, make good type designers, but there's something I really like about this face. It's charming and naive and willfully follows its rules, even when they don't really work. I do find it odd, though, that this typeface is so rectangular when Saarinen's buildings have such swooping curves. I worked from blueprints and had an interesting challenge getting characters like @, \$ and € to fit into Saarinen's system. The arrows all came from the blueprints as well. This face was drawn for an architecture firm working on a restoration and renovation of Dulles Airport."

**Q:** In 2003 you worked on the wayfinding systems at la Guardia, JFK and Newark airports. Was this the evolution of Schiphol?

**PM:** Because of the lack of a proper international signage standard for airports, as mentioned before, we decided to follow our own airport wayfinding standards. So most of our principles have been applied to other airports like JFK, Newark and LaGuardia (all owned by the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey). Also you can find them on the airports of Columbus Ohio, Washington Dulles, Rotterdam, Eindhoven, Aruba, Abu Dhabi, Frankfurt and Prague. Though some may differ in detail, the key principles remain the same.

It also gives us the opportunity to improve our own standard over the years. So at Schiphol Airport we changed from white-on-green signs for airport services to yellow-on-black signs, reserving green signs for emergency exit signs only. At Dulles airport the colour coding has been embedded in overall grey sign boxes as part of the Saarinen heritage. At this moment, we are experimenting with a new set of symbols that are more human and more close to the beautiful original set of symbols, designed by the German artist Gerd Arntz between 1933-1950.

**Q:** As airports get bigger do the signs simply get bigger as well? How would you provide clear and precise information at Heathrow T5 or Foster's Beijing airport?

**PM:** This is exactly the challenge we are facing now. We strongly believe that a part of these problems can be solved by the use of variable message signs, like LCD screens. We've already done a project for the Amsterdam Exhibition and Conference Centre, based on LCD displays only, and it was very successful. On these displays, only information is shown that is valid at that moment. Restaurants and shops close by are off the screen. For a series of information, like security procedures, we use animations on only one screen instead of using

more and bigger signs. Shortly, we hope to introduce a completely personalised wayfinding system. At the LCD display only information is given for visitors approaching the screen and it works even for larger groups. Additionally, confidential information can be supplied on your smart phone or at more securely positioned screens.

**Q:** You wrote sometime ago that only four typefaces should be used for wayfinding - Frutiger, Clearview, Gill or Meta. Have you added anything else to the list?

**PM:** For most signage systems we use Frutiger, but since there are many contemporary, highly readable new type fonts, we are not that strict if there is a reason to vary. So, we use Meta and Thesis additionally. But as repeated at any audience, especially graphic designers, the type font is a non-significant element of human factors that determines a successful signage that compliant to the needs of 'inclusive' or universal design. Key factors that really matter are: size, spacing and alignment.

**Q:** At a type symposium recently, Swiss type designer Erich Alb, who has recently produced a book on Frutiger, was flattering about the use of that font on signage and screens at Singapore Airport. If you could choose just one font for airport use, would it be Frutiger?

**PM:** Here you get a hearty yes, but we're happy with any other type font that is open and readable. There are no emotional strings to Frutiger. But there is one typeface with a personal emotional string, and that is Gill. Gill is the most human typeface ever, and whenever I open a book or face a sign that uses it I feel happiness.

The reason that we seldom use Gill for signage is that it isn't a very 'economical' font and also because there is no variant between the Gill sans regular and the bold - and that is exactly what we need for signage. p|